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**Opening Extract from...**

# **Don't Tell**

Written by Karen Rose

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KAREN  
ROSE  
DON'T  
TELL

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# Prologue

*Asheville, North Carolina,  
Nine years earlier*

The sounds were soothing. The gentle beep of the monitors, the quiet scrape of nurses' shoes on the tiled floor, muted voices in the corridors. She was lulled away from the pain into a restless sleep. *Safe*, she thought as she drifted away.

'Where's my wife? I have to see my wife!'

The frantic voice startled Mary Grace from her doze. She tried to open her eyes then remembered they were still swollen shut. *He's here.*

Someone had detained him. Someone with a deep voice that carried across the small room. Perhaps the doctor. *Yes, that must be it.*

'You need to go slowly, Officer Winters. Your wife needs you to be calm.'

'What happened? Let me go! I've got to see Mary Grace!'

'Your wife has had a serious accident. She doesn't look very good.'

'What . . . ' She heard him clear his throat. 'How bad is she hurt?'

Mary Grace strained to hear. *How bad was she hurt?* The

sharp pain in her head and arm threatened to fill her consciousness. The rest of her body felt numb. *Probably the painkillers*, she thought, battling the fog that loomed.

'She has a broken arm, so severely broken we had to pin it in two places. Her right leg is broken. We had to pin it as well, right above the knee. Multiple contusions on her face and to the back of her head. She has a deep cut over her eye. A fraction of an inch lower and she might have lost her eye.'

Mary Grace fought the shudder. It hurt far too much to jar her head, even involuntarily.

'But she'll be all right.' She heard the desperation in her husband's voice.

The long pause set Mary Grace's heart racing.

'She'll be all right, won't she? Dammit, Doctor, tell me the truth!'

*Yes, please do*, Mary Grace thought. *And hurry*. The numbness was already enveloping her once more.

'Your wife fell down a flight of stairs, Officer Winters. She fractured her back at the ninth vertebra. She lay there unconscious a long time, her spinal cord pinched.'

'Oh my God.'

Her racing heart went still. It was a moment before she took another breath, and that one was forced.

'She has . . . there is some paralysis.'

*Oh my God*, Mary Grace thought. *Oh my God*.

'Is it . . . permanent?'

'That's hard to say at this stage. We need to let the swelling subside, then we'll get a spinal cord injury specialist in from Raleigh to take a good look at your wife.'

'Can . . . can I see her?'

'Only for a few minutes. I'll just wait here.'

## DON'T TELL

She could hear him shuffle into the hospital room, his cowboy boots rasping against the tile. Then she could smell him, that intense aftershave he'd always worn. Then she could feel his heat as his large body hunkered down.

'Gracie,' he said sorrowfully. 'Mary Grace, what have you done to yourself, honey?' His big fingers brushed over the back of her hand, sending chills up the back of her neck. Then he was leaning forward, his lips brushing against her cheek. His mustache tickled her skin as he kissed his way from her cheek to her ear.

Then it came. She'd been waiting, knowing it would come. The knowing never lessened the dread.

'One word,' he breathed into her ear, so low no one would be able to hear. 'One word from your idiot mouth and next time I'll finish the job, I swear t'God.' He nuzzled, his lips seemingly caressing her outer ear. 'Understand?'

Mary Grace managed to tilt her pounding head enough to please him and he straightened, his hand passing over her hair, imperceptibly tightening to yank. Nausea rolled through her stomach.

'Oh, Gracie, darlin'. I just can't stand to see you this way.'

Her body instinctively shrank from his mournful tone, aching with every clench of her muscles.

'That's all the time you have today, Officer Winters. Why don't you just go on back to the station and we'll call you if there's any change? Or better yet, go on home.'

'I will.' His heavy sigh rent the air. 'Where's the boy?'

Her racing heart jittered to a stop once again. *Robbie. Where was Robbie?* A dim memory mocked. Robbie, holding her hand, begging her not to die, begging her to

wait for the ambulance. Was that this time or the time before? She struggled against the mind-numbing effects of the medication, needing to know who had her son.

'He's with the hospital social worker. He found her, you know. That kind of shock can cause a great emotional trauma in a boy his age.'

Rob's harsh voice carried across the room. *He's standing by the doctor now, she thought. He's leaving. He'll be alone with my son. 'He's a strong boy. He'll survive.'*

Mary Grace felt her hands grip the sheet, twist it until her fingers ached. Detached. She felt detached from her own mind. Helpless in her own body. *He'll survive. He has to. Please, Robbie, just hang on 'til I can get home.*

*And then life will be different.* She would protect herself. She would protect her son. She vowed Rob Winters would never hurt them again. But how?

*I'll find a way.*

# Chapter One

*Present day*  
*Douglas Lake, East Tennessee*  
*Sunday, March 4, 9:30 A.M.*

'God, I hate this part of the job. How the hell can you possibly eat at a time like this?'

Hutchins looked out at the placid morning calm of Douglas Lake, thought about the body they'd inevitably pull out and the stupidity of the waste. He finished the rest of his doughnut with the even keel of the veteran sheriff he was. 'Because I won't feel like eating when they pull out that kid. Might as well not starve.' He threw a sympathetic glance at the green face of his newest recruit. 'You'll get used to it, boy. Unfortunately, you'll get used to it.'

McCoy shook his head. 'You'd think they'd know better.'

'Kids don't ever "know better." You'll get used to that, too. Especially when they're on spring break. I expect to pull another couple out of the lake before the whole season's over.'

'I suppose I'll need to tell the parents when it's over.'

Hutchins shrugged and lit a cigarette. 'You started it, boy. You might as well finish it, too. Not my favorite task,



either, but you have to learn to break the bad news.'

McCoy focused on the boat slowly pulling the grappling hook across the lake floor. 'They're still hoping we'll find him alive somewhere. I swear t'God, Hutch – how can parents hold out hope like that? Those other boys told it clear enough. They were drinkin' and foolin' around and the kid wrecks his jet ski. They watched him sink.'

Hutchins dragged on the cigarette, let out the stream of smoke on a sigh. 'Kids are stupid. I keep telling you this. But parents—' He shook his gray head. 'They hope. They'll hope until you make them identify his body in the morgue.'

'Whatever's left of it,' McCoy grumbled.

'Hey, Tyler.' The words came crackling from McCoy's radio.

'Hey, Wendell,' McCoy answered, swallowing the bile that rose at the thought of what Wendell's hook was about to bring up. 'Whatcha got?'

'Well, it's no body, that's for damn sure.'

Hutchins grabbed the radio. 'What're you talkin' about, boy?'

'It's a car, Sheriff.'

Hutchins snorted. 'There's enough cars down there to fill a used car lot. My great-granny's house is down there, too.' All that shit was leftover from the TVA's flooding of the area when they built the dams in the 1930s. Everybody knew that.

'Yeah, all Model T's. This one's newer. Looks like a late eighties Ford. There's a little kid's backpack in the back seat – one of those Mutant Ninja Turtles things. We're bringing it in.'

'Damn.' Hutchins ground his cigarette under his heel.

'If it's not one thing, it's another. Bring it in, then keep looking for the boy.'

*Asheville, North Carolina*

*Sunday, March 4, 11:30 P.M.*

'Motha'fucka'.' The boy gasped. 'Sonofabitch.'

Rob Winters stared dispassionately at the young boy whose eyes had already begun to roll back in his head. Shame, that. He'd thought the boy would have more spine. At fourteen he himself had been able to take his old man's beatings with his head held high. He applied more pressure to the dark-skinned hand he had trapped in a vise grip. Just a hair more. The boy moaned again, sagging back against the alley wall with enough force to produce an audible crack when his wooly head with its ridiculous braids struck the brick.

'I don't know nothin'. I tol' you that already.' The boy sucked in a breath, tried to yank his hand away. 'You can let me go. I swear I won't be goin' to no cops. I swear it, man. On my mamma's grave.'

Winters's lip curled derisively. 'I'd bet a month's worth of your mamma's food stamps that she is very much alive and if you want to stay alive with her, you'll tell me what I want to know.' Winters's voice was still low and calm, a striking contrast to the gasping cries coming from the boy's swollen, bloody lips. 'Alonzo Jones. Where is he?'

The boy struggled, but Winters held him firmly against the alley wall. He whimpered, but Winters only tightened his bone-crushing grip. Winters leaned close to the boy's head so that his lips grazed his ear. 'Listen, boy, and listen real good because I only plan to tell you this

once. I need to know where to find Alonzo Jones and you need to keep the use of your hand. If I tighten just a little more, you'll have permanent nerve damage. That'll cause you problems next time you decide to knock off an all-night convenience store.'

The boy's eyes grew wide, the whites of his eyes shining bright in the darkness. 'I didn't do no store, man. I swear it. Goddammit!' The last came out on a shrill note as Winters tightened his grip another notch.

'You did it all right. We have you on video, boy. You and that gang you run with headed by one Mr Alonzo Jones. Now you can come along with me to the station and tell us all about stickin' a knife in a sixty-two-year-old unarmed white man or you can tell me where I can find Alonzo Jones. I want him more than I want to see your sorry ass rottin' away in jail.'

The boy licked his bloody lip and his eyes went narrow with hate. 'You're a cop? Shit, man. I don't need to talk to you. I don't need to talk to nobody but my lawyer. Police brutality. I know you white cops like to beat on us black folk.' He leaned back against the wall, sweat beading on his upper lip as he tried to pull his hand free. 'Yo' ass is gonna roast.'

Winters smiled and took pleasure watching the hate in the boy's eyes swing back to fear. He squeezed. Hard. And cocked his head to be able to hear the sound of popping cartilage over the boy's shrieks.

'Motha'fuckin' sonofabitch!'

'Some vocabulary that sainted mother of yours lets you keep. Jones. *Now.*'

The boy sagged again, his knees hitting the asphalt. 'With his woman.'

Winters released the boy's hand and clamped his

fingers around his dirty, scrawny neck, pushing him face forward into the street as the boy cradled his injured hand in his good one. 'Her name?'

'I don't—' A strangled cry of pain cut off his pathetic denial. Winters lifted his thumb from the boy's larynx. 'Chaniqua,' he gasped.

Winters's boot connected with the boy's hip. The boy rolled into a ball, crying like a baby. 'Last name, you worthless' – he kicked again, the tip of his boot catching the boy in the gut and flipping him to his back – 'spineless, piece of shit.'

A faint moan floated on the air. 'Pierce. Chaniqua Pierce. Cuts . . . hair. Down . . . town.'

Winters grimaced as the boy lost the contents of his stomach all over Winters's boots. 'You disgusting—' Rage rose to mix with the disgust and he kicked the boy again. And again. And again. 'Now you know how that old man felt curled up in a ball on his own floor dying in a pool of his own blood.' He wiped a boot on the boy's dirty pants, transferring most of the filth where it belonged. Then he aimed and kicked again, savagely. The boy's scrawny body hit the brick wall and his eyes rolled backwards, blood flowing steadily from the corner of his mouth. A final kick to his head finished the job and the boy shuddered out his last breath.

Winters drew a deep breath and wiped his other dirty boot on the boy's shirt.

One less punk on the streets. He considered it a job well done. He peeled the thin latex gloves from his hands and tossed them in the third dumpster he passed. One could never be too careful with street punks. Nasty diseases all over the damn street.

By the time he'd walked the quarter mile to his parked

truck he'd pulled the cotton from the gap between his cheeks and molars, the false overbite from his upper palate, and the gray wig from his head. Nobody could tie him to that punk even if anyone cared enough to call the police. He cast a brief look up and down the street before carefully putting his wig away. He changed his boots, stowing the fouled pair in the back with a frown. They were his best ones. Then he shrugged. Sue Ann would clean them later. He swung up into the driver's seat, ten feet tall and bulletproof.

It was time to pay a visit to *Miz* Chaniqua Pierce.

He'd driven less than five minutes when his pager buzzed against his hip. He glanced at the number from the corner of his eye while keeping his gaze pinned to the low-lifes that skulked about in the hours most decent people were in their beds. Dammit to hell. Couldn't that bitch leave him alone for five minutes? He pulled his phone from his pocket with a snarl, punched in her number.

'Ross.'

Winters ground his teeth. Ross, as in Lieutenant. As in Q-U-O-T-A, written in big black letters. As in the bitch that stole the job that should have been his.

He injected as much oozing sincerity into his voice as he could muster on a semi-full stomach. 'Winters. What's up?'

'The same thing that was up the last six times I paged you in the past hour. What seems to be more important than returning my calls, Detective?'

Winters drew a breath. She'd written him up for insubordination once already. Insubordination. The very thought made his stomach burn as rage ate at him. He'd been 'warned.' Warned, goddammit, by some incompetent bitch with an ass the size of South Carolina. He managed

to control his tone, barely. 'I was with an informant, Lieutenant.'

'Did you find Jones?'

'No, but I know where he is.'

'Care to share it with me?'

So she could send in one of her handpicked ass-sucking favorites to make the bust? No fucking way. 'I'd prefer to wait until I'm certain.'

'I guess you would. I prefer you tell me now.'

Bitch. 'He's with his girlfriend.'

There was a short, tight silence on the other end. Small victory, he thought. 'Does this girlfriend have a name, Detective? And please don't play games with me again. I want answers and I want them now.'

Winters bit down so hard his teeth hurt. 'Her name is Chaniqua Priest.' Or Pierce. The kid was gurgling there towards the end. He could have said Priest.

'You have a location?'

'Just downtown.'

'Helpful, Detective. Keep your informant available in case we have more questions.'

Winters swallowed the chuckle. His informant was now answering questions at the business end of a fiery pitchfork. 'Yes, sir,' he said, knowing the 'sir' pissed her off more than anything else, but technically was not something she could get him on. 'Did you have a particular reason for paging me, Lieutenant Ross?'

'Yeah. You got a call from a Sheriff Hutchins, Sevier County, Tennessee. He says it's urgent you call him.' She rattled off the number and he memorized it instantly. He had a good memory for numbers and names. He'd been through Sevier County on his way to Gatlinburg, but he'd never heard of Hutchins.

Winters pulled into the first convenience store parking lot he saw and punched in Hutchins's number. The sheriff was available, his assistant told him, if he'd please hold. Winters grumbled as he waited. This had better be important, he thought. He was using up cell phone minutes waiting on this yahoo. Finally the illustrious sheriff came to the phone, huffing and puffing.

'Sorry to keep you waiting so long, Officer Winters,' he said and Winters could hear the creaking of a chair in the background as the sheriff apparently sat down.

'It's Detective Winters,' he corrected sharply. Didn't Ross tell him that? Bitch.

'Oh, sorry. Your lieutenant told me you'd been promoted. My brain's a little fried at the moment. We've been draggin' Douglas Lake all day lookin' for an accident victim and I just had the pleasure of tellin' his parents.'

'That's a shame,' Winters offered, rolling his eyes.

'But what does that have to do with you, huh? Listen, Winters, when we were dragging the lake we came up with something else. I thought you should know before the bureaucrats get involved.'

Winters listened and suddenly Lieutenant Ross and Alonzo Jones were the last things on his mind.

They'd found his car. Seven years of helpless fury came rushing back with the force of a freight train. They'd found his car, but his boy was not inside.

Neither was his wife.